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The structure of verb complexes in Asho Chin

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the canonical structure of the verb complex and its relation to the person marking system in modern colloquial Asho Chin. In Asho Chin, the final modality marker of a verb complex is obligatory in any main declarative clause. The paper describes how the verb and final modality marker within the verb complex undergo morphophonological changes, such as tone alternation and consonant voicing, according to whether a speech-act participant is involved in the event being described.

1 Introduction

1.1 Profile of the language

Asho Chin (ISO 639-3: csh) belongs to the Kuki-Chin branch of Tibeto-Burman languages. The language's primary speaking areas are widely but sporadically scattered throughout southwest Myanmar and the Chittagong hill tracts in Bangladesh (Figure 1). According to Grierson (1904: 341–342) and VanBik (2009: 37–38), Asho Chin has at least two to six different regional dialects. Out of those dialects, the one spoken in Insein township of Yangon, where the Asho Chin Baptist Church and the head office of the Asho Chin National Literature and Culture Central Committee are located, is the topic of this paper. My consultant, Mr./Salai Kyaw Htwe, born in Yangon in 1962, works as a secretary and Asho Chin language instructor for the committee.

The estimated number of native speakers of Asho Chin is between 34,000 (Lewis, Simons and Fennig eds. 2014) and 174,000 (Simons and Fennig eds. 2017). However, some researchers have also reported a native-speaking population as small as 11,500, based on Grimes ed. (2000).

Under the strong influence of Burmese, Asho Chin shows numerous lexical borrowings from Burmese, ranging from content words such as nouns and verbs to function words such as auxiliaries.

Asho Chin's orthography uses the Pwo Karen-based alphabet, which many Asho Chin speakers have adopted since a primer on the language was published (Baptist Board of Publications 1952). However, because the orthography often inaccurately reflects the actual pronunciation of modern colloquial Asho Chin, we use the original phonemic transcription (§1.3) to describe Asho Chin in this paper.



Figure 1
Asho Chin speaking area

1.2 Previous studies

Fryer (1875), Houghton (1892, 1895), Grierson (1904), Joorman (1906), and Bernot and Bernot (1958) have investigated Asho Chin and its closely related languages, exemplifying the grammar and basic lexicon of the Sandoway, Minbu and Chittagong dialects of the language. However, their works significantly differ from each other not only in the language's transcription and lexicon but also in its grammatical description perhaps due to its rich dialectal variety. Also, those works did not describe some linguistic features of Asho Chin detected in the field research conducted for this paper.

1.3 Phonology

The syllable structure is C1(C2)V(C3)/T, where C is a consonant; V, a vowel; and T, a tone that covers the whole syllable. The consonants for C1 appear as below. Note that /fi/ only appears in bound morphemes.

Table 1 Initial consonants (C1)

/p/ /ph/[p ^h]	/b/ /b̃/	/t/ /th/[t ^h]	/d/ /d̃/	/c/[tɕ]	/ch/[tɕ ^h]	/j/[dʒ]	/k/ /kh/[k ^h]	/g/	/ʔ/
/m/ /hm/[ɱm]		/n/ /hn/[ɲn]		/ɲ/ /hɲ/[ɲɲ]		/ŋ/ /hŋ/[ŋ̃ŋ]			
		/s/ /sh/[s ^h]	/z/	/ɕ/				/h/ /fi/	
		/l/ /hl/[l̥l]							
		/r/[ɹ]		/y/[j]			/w/		

C1 is occasionally followed by C2: /w, y[j], l/. The variety for final consonant (C3) in Asho Chin is distinctively smaller than in any other Kuki-Chin language, with only two final possibilities: /N, ʔ/. Although it is allophonic and optional, the glottal stop /ʔ/ in C3 is phonetically realized as a geminate of the following stop (e.g., /hnòʔtà/ [ɲnòttà] ‘tomorrow’), and the final nasal /N/ is often realized as nasalization of the preceding vowel, which may also appear as a homorganic nasal before stops (e.g., /ɕèNδón/ [ɕè̃mδón(N)] ‘corn’). Burmese also share these phonological features, thus my consultant often commented that Asho Chin sounds similar to Burmese rather than other Chin languages in that it does not distinguish the three final unreleased stops [p̚, t̚, k̚] and the three final nasals [m, n, ŋ] as other Chin languages do.

Asho Chin has the following vowels as shown in Table 2, leaving the possibility that [i] and [ɪ] could be just allophones of the same phoneme for some speakers under certain phonological conditions.

Table 2 Vowels (V)

i	ɪ	ʊ	u	
e[e~eɪ]	ə[ə~əʊ]	o[o~oʊ]	ai	aʊ
ɛ		ɔ	(diphthongs)	
a				

Asho Chin is a tonal language with two to three contrastive tones: /˥/[ɿ] (high), /˩/[ɿ̃] (low), and probably /˨˨˩/[V] (falling). The falling tone, however, is infrequent, occurring only in some grammatical clitics and interjections, many of which may well derive from an underlying low tone. There is also an atonic syllable, which may be described as /C1(C2)ǎ/.

1.4 Typological overview

Asho Chin is a predicate-final language, and its unmarked word order is SV in intransitive clauses and APV in transitive clauses. Also, Asho Chin is an agglutinative language, and various clitics and affixes represent the grammatical relation between a verb and its arguments.

Asho Chin exhibits ergative-absolutive or ergative-accusative (tripartite) alignment in case marking on arguments. The subject, or semantic role of an agent in a transitive clause—except for the first person pronouns, *cè* (1SG) and *cămè* (1PL), and the second person pronouns, *nàʊN* (2SG) and *nàʊNmè* (2PL)¹—takes ergative case as illustrated in (2)–(4).

The subject or single argument of an intransitive clause and the direct object, or semantic role of a patient in a transitive clause are generally unmarked or absolutive, if the argument is inanimate (See (2) and (3)). The object marker *=hà* (OBJ) is optional or non-obligatory with animate object, but obligatory with any object with a human referent, as in (3) and (4). However, the object marker *=hà* (OBJ) occasionally marks an inanimate direct object as in (33).

- (1) *păshén káʔ=kəʔ*
 PR cry=3.REAL
 ‘Pasen cried.’

- (2) *păshén=nəʔ wóʔsòʔón ʔă=ʔé=hóʔ*
 PR=ERG pork.curry 3SG=eat=REAL
 ‘Pasen ate pork curry.’

- (3) *păshén=nəʔ pyèʔphyə=há nămó mlòʔʔé=dùn=lwí ʔă=pàʔ=kəʔ*
 PR=ERG PR=OBJ DEM play=NMZ=PL 3SG=give=REAL
 ‘Pasen gave those toys to Pyay Phyoe.’

- (4) *nămó ʔwì=nəʔ lálà=há ʔă=só=sháʔN=ŋəʔ*
 DEM dog=ERG PR=OBJ 3SG=bite=frequently=REAL
 ‘That dog frequently bites Lala.’

Note that any clitic in Asho Chin starting with a consonant *h*, such as *=hóʔ* (REAL), follows the phonological rules of assimilation below. (cf. As to a suffix with *h*-, another rule is applied: *h*→ʔ/?_)

- h*→k/?_ e.g., *káʔ=kəʔ* ‘cried’ as in Example (1)
h→ŋ/N_ e.g., *ʔă=só=sháʔN=ŋəʔ* ‘frequently bites’ as in Example (4).

1 This holds true to DeLancey’s (1981) suggestion that many split ergative languages make the split between first and second person pronouns, which do not distinguish A from S forms, and all other arguments, which do.

The case markers =fà (OBJ, LOC) and =fà (INS) also follow the rules above, and also tend to change their tones to high (e.g., =fá and =fá) if immediately preceded by a low tone, as shown in (3) and (4).

2 Pronominal clitics and verb complex constituents

The verb complex in modern colloquial Asho Chin is preceded by an optional pronominal clitic that conveys the person and number indexation of its intransitive/transitive subject. The scope of the verb complex may well not include a pronominal clitic. However, in this paper, we provisionally include a pronominal clitic within the scope of our study, because a pronominal clitic is intricately related to the person marking system as well as a verb complex in Asho Chin. The structure of a verb complex and a pronominal clitic in a main declarative clause appears below.

(PRONOMINAL CLITIC)= (PRONOMINAL PREFIX)-VERB=(AUXILIARY)=FINAL MODALITY MARKER

As an illustration, consider the following verb complex with a pronominal clitic in (5), which illustrates all the elements shown in the template above except a pronominal prefix (§3.2).

- (5) cè tóhnù?ká cón=ŋà [kǎ=sí=lá=fá?]
 1SG today=LOC school=LOC 1SG=go=must=REAL
 ‘I must go to school today.’

2.1 Pronominal clitics

Asho Chin has the following types of pronominals: a set of independent personal pronouns and pronominal clitics (Table 3), along with a pronominal prefix mǎ- (>1/2-), which we will discuss further in §3.2. Asho Chin's pronominal clitics may probably derive from personal pronouns through the process of ‘pronominalization’ (Van Driem 1993), as in many other Kuki-Chin languages.

Table 3 Pronominal clitics

	SG	PL
1	kǎ=	mǎ=
2	nǎ=	mǎ=
3	Ø= [INTR] / ?ǎ= [TR]	Ø= [INTR] / mǎ= [TR]

Several previous studies, such as Fryer (1875), Houghton (1892) and Joorman (1906), reported a set of dual personal pronouns and a dual pronominal clitic nǎ=. The neighboring Kuki-Chin languages, K'Cho (Kee Shein Mang 2006) and Daai Chin (Hartmann-So 2009), also distinguish among singular, dual, and plural in number. According to my consultant, the dual pronominals are hardly used or heard in modern Asho Chin, except in some old folktales and traditional songs (Otsuka 2015: 130). Asho Chin's pronominals currently have just two numbers; singular and plural.

If followed by a verb as illustrated in (6) and (7), a pronominal clitic agrees in person and number with its subject. Note that a third person subject is zero marked on an intransitive verb, as in (6) c. When attached to an inalienable noun (e.g., *kǎ=kú?* ‘my hand’), it functions as a possessive marker.

- (6) a. *kǎ=dǎlí=fhó?* b. *nǎ=dǎlí=fhó?* c. *(*ʔa=)dǎlí=fhó?* d. *mǎ=dǎlí=fhó?*
 1SG=play=REAL 2SG=play=REAL (*3SG=)play=3.REAL PL=play=REAL
 ‘I played.’ ‘You played.’ ‘He/She/They played.’ ‘We/You played.’
- (7) a. *kǎ=ʔé=fhó?* b. *nǎ=ʔé=fhó?* c. *ʔǎ=ʔé=fhó?* d. *mǎ=ʔé=fhó?*
 1SG=eat=REAL 2SG=eat=REAL 3SG=eat=REAL PL=eat=REAL
 ‘I ate it.’ ‘You ate it.’ ‘He/She ate it.’ ‘We/You/They ate it.’

It is interesting to observe that a pronominal clitic is frequently omitted in a main declarative clause. For example, all the pronominal clitics enclosed in parentheses in (8) can be omitted because they are optional, if not redundant, in modern colloquial Asho Chin. On the other hand, in Daai Chin, one of the neighboring Kuki-Chin languages, subject agreement is obligatory for first and second person subjects in simple indicative clauses (Hartmann-So 2009: 234–236).

- (8) a. *cè plái=bò hlónshùn (kǎ=)síʔ=kái*
 1SG PR=ALL trip 1SG=go=IRR
 ‘I will go on a trip to Pyay.’
- b. *báUN=ŋə (nǎ=)síʔ=kái=mə*
 what=INS 2SG=go=IRR=Q
 ‘How will you go there?’
- c. *yǎthà=fhó (kǎ=)síʔ=kái làʔhmàʔ=khó (kǎ=)hlé=plí=ŋəʔ*
 train=INS 1SG=go=IRR ticket=also 1SG=buy=finish=NSIT.REAL
 ‘I will go there by train. I already bought a ticket.’

2.2 Verbs and auxiliaries

In Asho Chin, post-verbal clitics, such as auxiliaries and verb-complex-final modality markers (§2.3), generally mark tense, aspect, and modality. See the deontic auxiliary *=lá* ‘must’ in (5) for example.

2.3 Verb-complex-final modality markers

It is noteworthy to point out that Asho Chin has a specific set of ‘verb-complex-final’ modality markers, or ‘final modality markers’, one of which is necessary in any main declarative clause, much like a Burmese verb sentence marker (Okell 1969: 118–119). K’Cho and Daai Chin, the neighboring Kuki-Chin languages, also have formally similar tense markers, but these tense markers do not appear in certain types of main declarative clauses (Kee Shein Mang 2006: 21, Hartmann-So 2009: 247–250).

The following are the most commonly used final modality markers in main declarative clauses in Asho Chin: [1] =hǎʔ (REAL), [2] =hái (IRR), and [3] =láʔ (NEG). Let us note once again that the final modality markers starting with an initial consonant h, namely =hǎʔ (REAL) and =hái (IRR) regularly follow the morphophonological rules as shown in §1.4: =hǎʔ/=hái can also be realized as =kǎʔ/=kái after the final glottal stop ʔ (cf. h→k/ʔ_), or as =ŋǎʔ/=ŋái after the final nasal N (cf. h→ŋ/N_).

[1] Realis (REAL)

When eliciting a verb in Asho Chin, the realis marker =hǎʔ generally follows a verb and serves as its citation form. The realis marker =hǎʔ indicates an affirmation of the speaker that a particular event has occurred at some prior time or is in the middle of taking place at the time of speaking, as illustrated in (9).

- | | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| (9) a. mázá=hǎʔ | b. phóʔ=kǎʔ | c. phwán=ŋǎʔ |
| help=REAL | read=REAL | open=REAL |
| ‘(Someone) helped it.’ | ‘(Someone) read it.’ | ‘(Someone) opened it.’ |

[2] Irrealis (IRR)

The irrealis marker =hái is mainly used to describe a future event or express the speaker's speculation about an event. The clitic =hái also functions as a subordinator (SUBORD), as illustrated in (12).

- | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| (10) a. mázá=hái | b. phóʔ=kái | c. phwán=ŋái |
| help=IRR | read=IRR | open=IRR |
| ‘(Someone) will help it.’ | ‘(Someone) will read it.’ | ‘(Someone) will open it.’ |

[3] Negative (NEG)

The negative marker =láʔ or =hnǎʔ indicates negation in a declarative main clause and is accompanied by interesting morphophonological changes²: a low tone in the verb's initial syllable is raised to a high tone, and the verb's initial voiceless and unaspirated consonant, such as p, s, t, c, or k, is changed to its corresponding voiced consonant, b, z, d, j, or g. The distinction between realis and irrealis modality is neutralized in negation, and negative clauses are unmarked by agreement, as shown in (11) and (12)

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| (11) a. cè kǎ=sàɪ=hǎʔ | b. cè zái=láʔ |
| 1SG 1SG=make=REAL | 1SG make=NEG |
| ‘I made it.’ | ‘I did not make it./I will not make it.’ |

2 Some previous papers reported that a syllabic nasal, such as n-/m-/mb- (Fryer 1875: 55) or Hn- (Joorman 1906: 34), is prefixed to a verb and/or to a modality marker in negation, which is not attested in modern colloquial Asho Chin.

- (12) ʔăpóʔ mí-fé=fái hló=nəʔ cè (*kǎ=)ʔé=láʔ
 stomach ache-AO=SUBORD fear=SUBORD 1SG (*1SG=)eat=NEG
 ‘I will not eat it for fear of getting a stomachache.’

This paper will focus on a main declarative clause and mainly deal with [1] the reality marker =fəʔ (REAL) and [2] the irreality marker =fái (IRR) in an affirmative sentence.

3 A verb complex and person marking system

Although a pronominal clitic is frequently omitted or dropped from a verb predicate in conversation (§2.1), there is yet another person marking system working within an A sho Chin verb complex.

As with any Chin language, tone is a crucial component of the grammar of A sho Chin. When looking into each tone on every verb complex constituent, we found that the verb complexes have two different structures, showing the distinction between intransitive clauses with first and second person subjects—that is, the speech-act participants—and those with third person subjects as illustrated in (13).

- (13) cè yáizáʔ=kái yàʔ=khó yáizáʔ=kài
 1SG be.tired=IRR 3SG=also be.tired=3.IRR
 ‘I will get tired. He will also get tired.’

We will discuss the distinction more in intransitive clauses in §3.1. Also, even a more significant distinction can be found between transitive clauses with first and second person objects and those with third person objects. Thus, we will further discuss the case in transitive clauses in §3.2.

3.1 Intransitive clauses

The realis marker and the irrealis marker (§2.3) show agreement with a third person singular or plural subject by tone change. This tone change regularly takes place if a high tone is assigned to the preceding syllable. A high tone of the realis/irrealis modality marker (e.g., =fəʔ/=fái) is always changed to a low tone (e.g., =fə̀ʔ/=fài) to indicate third person singular/plural agreement with a subject, as illustrated in (14) c.

- (14) a. ʔăní hánphó=fə̀ʔ=mə̀ b. cè (kǎ=)hánphó=fə̀ʔ c. yàʔ hánphó=fə̀ʔ
 who yawn=3.REAL=Q 1SG 1SG=yawn=REAL 3SG yawn=3.REAL
 ‘Who yawned?’ ‘I yawned.’ ‘He yawned.’

If a high tone syllable does not precede the realis/irrealis marker, some verb complexes do not show such a clear distinction as described above. However, others still show the distinction by changing the verb's tone. Take the case of an intransitive verb lò ‘to come’ as an example in (15).

- (15) hnòʔtà=fhá yàʔ lò=fháí cè=khwà ló=fháí nàʊN=khó ló=fháí=mə
tomorrow=LOC 3SG come=IRR 1SG=TOP come=IRR 2SG=also come=IRR=Q
‘Tomorrow, he will come. As for me, I will come. Will you come, too?’

Frequently observed are alternate tones on some verbs: a low tone—except for checked syllables as in (18)—of certain verbs is raised to a high tone in intransitive clauses with first and second person subjects as in (17). Such alternation is also found in transitive clauses regardless of person as in (16). Although my consultant maintained that both versions share the same meaning and appear in the same format in any sentence, there might be a slight possibility that the tone alternation may be triggered by discourse-pragmatic factors, which require further investigation. In any case, the important thing to notice here is that such tone alternation does not occur in intransitive clauses with third person subjects, as in (17) c.

- (16) a. cè {hì/hí}=fíʔ b. nàʊN {hì/hí}=fíʔ c. yàʔ {hì/hí}=fíʔ
1SG ask=REAL 2SG ask=REAL 3SG ask=REAL
‘I asked it.’ ‘You asked it.’ ‘He asked it.’
- (17) a. cè {klò/kló}=fíʔ b. nàʊN {klò/kló}=fíʔ c. yàʔ {klò=fíʔ/*kló=fíʔ}
1SG fall=REAL 2SG fall=REAL 3SG fall=REAL/fall=3.REAL
‘I fell down.’ ‘You fell down.’ ‘He/She fell down.’

Such tone alternation as illustrated above does not occur in some verbs, as seen in (18).

- (18) a. cè (kǎ=)klàʊʔ=kóʔ b. nàʊN (nǎ=)klàʊʔ=kóʔ c. yàʔ klàʊʔ=kóʔ
1SG 1SG=fall=REAL 2SG 2SG=fall=REAL 3SG fall=REAL
‘I fell down.’ ‘You fell down.’ ‘He/She fell down.’

In Asho Chin, a small number of verbs have a pair of different stem forms that also share the same semantic meaning, such as klò ‘to fall’ in (17) and klàʊʔ ‘to fall’ in (18), which might possibly be related to the “verb stem alternation” that is commonly found in many Kuki-Chin languages (VanBik 2009: 10-16).

Among the intransitive verbs with a pair of different stem forms, several verbs such as sí/síʔ ‘to go’, ʔí/ʔíʔ ‘to sleep’, and shó/shòʔ ‘to go out’ exhibit person restriction, wherein one stem form of the pair only agrees with first and second person subjects. For example, sí ‘go’ can only be used in intransitive clauses with first and second person subjects as shown in (19), while síʔ ‘go’ is not affected by any person restriction, as in (20).

- (19) a. cè (kǎ=)sí=fháí b. nàʊN (nǎ=)sí=fháí c. yàʔ *sí=fháí
1SG 1SG=go=IRR 2SG 2SG=go=IRR 3SG go=3.IRR
‘I will go.’ ‘You will go.’

- (20) a. cè (kǎ=)síʔ=kái b. nàUN (nǎ=)síʔ=kái c. yàʔ síʔ=kài
 1SG 1SG=go=IRR 2SG 2SG=go=IRR 3SG go=3.IRR
 ‘I will go.’ ‘You will go.’ ‘He/She will go.’

3.2 Transitive clauses

In transitive clauses with first and second person objects, the pronominal prefix *mǎ-* is attached to a transitive verb, co-occurring with consonant voicing and tone change in the following syllable: a voiceless unaspirated initial consonant, such as p, s, t, c, or k, is changed to its voiced counterpart, such as b, z, d, j, or g, and a low tone is raised to a high tone, much like the process of negation described in §2.3 [3]. See (21)–(24), and compare them with the corresponding transitive clauses with third person objects, as in (25) and (26). Although the prefix *mǎ-* is optional, the co-occurring morphophonological changes are obligatory.

- (21) yàʔ=nəʔ cè=fhá (mǎ-)ďǎIN=ŋǎʔ
 3SG=ERG 1SG=OBJ >1/2-hit=REAL
 ‘He hit me.’ (cf. ďǎIN ‘to hit’)

- (22) yàʔmè=nəʔ nàUN=ŋǎ (mǎ-)ďǎIN=ŋǎʔ shí=mè
 3PL=ERG 2SG=OBJ >1/2-hit=REAL COP=Q
 ‘They hit you, didn't they?’

- (23) sǎlài cóthwè=nəʔ nàUN=ŋǎ ʔǎéǎzó (mǎ-)zóʔpàirʔ=kǎʔ=shà
 Mr. PR=ERG 2SG=OBJ Asho.literature >1/2-teach=REAL=SPF
 ‘Salai Kyaw Hwe teaches you Asho Chin, doesn't he?’ (cf. zòʔpàir ‘to teach’)

- (24) sǎlài cóthwè=nəʔ cè=fhá ʔǎéǎzó (mǎ-)zóʔpàirʔ=kǎʔ
 Mr. PR=ERG 1SG=OBJ Asho.literature >1/2-teach=REAL
 ‘Salai Kyaw Hwe teaches me Asho Chin.’

- (25) yàʔ=nəʔ pǎshén=ŋǎ (ʔǎ=)ďǎIN=ŋǎʔ
 3SG=ERG PR=OBJ 3SG=hit=REAL
 ‘He hit Pasen.’

- (26) sǎlài cóthwè=nəʔ jǎpǎN pǎ-ʔǎʔ=kà ʔǎéǎzó (ʔǎ=)zóʔpàirʔ=kǎʔ
 Mr. PR=ERG Japan CLF-one=OBJ Asho.literature 3SG=teach=REAL
 ‘Salai Kyaw Hwe teaches Asho Chin to a Japanese man.’

The pronominal prefix *mǎ-* is identical in form to the pronominal clitic *mǎ=* (PL). However, the two forms are only distinguishable when either consonant voicing or tone change occurs, as in (27) and (28).

(27) yàʔmè=nəʔ pāshén=ŋà (mǎ=)tòN=ŋóʔ
 3PL=ERG PR=OBJ PL=follow=REAL
 ‘They followed Pasen.’ (cf. tòN ‘to follow’)

(28) pāshén=nəʔ cāmè=fhá (mǎ-)dón=ŋóʔ
 PR=ERG 1PL=OBJ >1/2-follow=REAL
 ‘Pasen followed us.’

Interestingly enough, no pronominal clitics—except for the first person singular clitic kǎ=(1SG=)—co-occur with mǎ-, as illustrated in (29): *nǎ=mǎ- (2SG=>1/2-) / *ʔǎ=mǎ- (3SG=>1/2-) / *mǎ=mǎ- (PL=>1/2-).

(29) nàUN cè=fhá nǎmó sóʔúʔ (*nǎ=)mǎ-báiʔ=kái shí=láʔ=mə
 2SG 1SG=OBJ DEM book 2SG=>1/2-give=IRR be=NEG=Q
 ‘You will give me that book, won't you?’ (cf. pàíʔ ‘to give’)

This feature suggests that another person agreement system is established in transitive clauses with first and second objects, which is quite different from the one dictated by personal clitics in Table 3. The example with kǎ=mǎ- (1SG=>1/2-) and its shortened sentences are given in (30) below.

- (30) a. cè nàUN=ŋá nǎmó sóʔúʔ kǎ=mǎ-báiʔ=kái
 1SG 2SG=OBJ DEM book 1SG=>1/2-give=IRR
 ‘I will give you that book.’ (cf. pàíʔ ‘to give’)
- b. cè nàUN=ŋá nǎmó sóʔúʔ mǎ-báiʔ=kái
 1SG 2SG=OBJ DEM book >1/2-give=IRR
 ‘I will give you that book.’
- c. cè nàUN=ŋá nǎmó sóʔúʔ báiʔ=kái
 1SG 2SG=OBJ DEM book give=IRR
 ‘I will give you that book.’

The pronominal prefix mǎ- does not occur in a negative clause as neither do pronominal clitics, as illustrated in (31) and (32) below.

(31) yàʔ=nəʔ cè=fhá (*mǎ-)ďáIN=láʔ
 3SG=ERG 1SG=OBJ >1/2-hit=NEG
 ‘He did not hit me./He will not hit me.’ (cf. ďáIN ‘to hit’)

- (32) sǎlǎi cǒthwè=nəʔ cè=fhá ʔǎəzǒ (*mǎ-)zǒʔpàʔ=láʔ
 Mr. PR=ERG 1SG=OBJ Asho.literature >1/2-teach=NEG
 ‘Salai Kyaw Hwe did not teach me Asho Chin./Salai Kyaw Hwe will not teach me Asho Chin.’

Actually, the pronominal prefix mǎ- not only agrees with a first or second person object but also indicates that the P argument designates a speech-act participant's property, as shown in (33). Also, the pronominal prefix mǎ- appears in less transitive construction, as in (34).

- (33) nágiʔ mùndǎn=nəʔ cè ʔín=ŋà (mǎ-)phyáʔshí=bàʔ=kǎʔ
 Nargis cyclone=ERG 1SG house.OBL=OBJ >1/2=destroy=BEN=REAL
 ‘Cyclone Nargis destroyed my house.’

- (34) a. yó ʔǒ=fháʔ b. yó=nəʔ (cǎmè=fhá) (mǎ-)ʔǒ=nàʊʔ=kǎʔ
 rain rain(INTR)=REAL rain=ERG 1PL=OBJ >1/2-rain(INTR)=TRZ=REAL
 ‘It rained.’ ‘It rained on us.’

4 Conclusions

The present paper briefly outlines modern colloquial Asho Chin and illustrates the canonical structure of a verb complex and pronominal markers, in which the final modality marker is a necessary element in any main declarative clause.

In the latter part, the paper demonstrates that not only non-obligatory pronominal clitics but also the verb complex plays a vital role by itself in a person marking system or in a pragmatic category (speech act participation), according to whether a speech-act participant is involved in the event expressed by the verb complex.

Asho Chin's pronominal clitic has three persons (i.e., first, second, and third) and two numbers (i.e., singular and plural) to show agreement with the subject. Our data suggest that the verb complex shows the formal contrast between speech-act participants (SAP) and non-speech-act participants (non-SAP) if they are involved in the subject of intransitive clauses, or in the object of transitive clauses.

This paper has also provided an overview of how the pronominal prefix mǎ- is attached to the verbs in transitive clauses with first and second person objects, which shows a kind of inverse marking system on 1st=2nd>3rd person hierarchy. DeLancey (2009) mentioned 1st=2nd>3rd person hierarchy in Tibeto-Burman languages as follows:

In a number of modern languages (e.g., Gyarong, Chepang, Nocte) the verb also marks in transitive clauses whether the subject is higher or lower than the object on a 1st > 2nd > 3rd or 1st = 2nd > 3rd person hierarchy, and this ‘direct/inverse’ marking system is probably also to be reconstructed for the Proto-Tibeto-Burman verb. While no modern language preserves this reconstructed system in its

entirety, most of these categories are retained at least vestigially in a large number of languages which represent nearly every major division of the family. (DeLancey 2009: 699–700)

Considering the pronominal prefix *mǎ-* and the formal changes of the following verb complex, Asho Chin seems to have 1st=2nd>3rd person hierarchy in transitive clauses, where no distinction should be made between first and second person. Many of the central and southern Chin languages, such as Mizo (Chhangte 1993), Lai (Peterson 1998, 2003), and Daai Chin (So-Hartmann 2009) have kinds of clitic pronouns that show agreement with the object, which Asho Chin do not. Instead, Asho Chin has a pronominal prefix *mǎ-* which function as an inverse marker. The pronominal prefix *mǎ-* is similar to the cislocative marker *óŋ-* in Tiddim Chin (a Northern Chin language), which is also obligatorily affixed to a transitive verb if the object or undergoer is a speech-act participant (Otsuka 2009).

The discussion in the paper can be summarized as follows.

- Intransitive clauses -
 - with first and second person subjects (SAP):
 - ✧ Tone alternation between H and L is frequently observed in some intransitive verbs.
 - ✧ A small number of intransitive verbs can only agree with first/second person subjects.
 - with third person subjects (non-SAP):
 - ✧ Tone alternation between H and L is not observed in any intransitive verb.
 - ✧ The verb-complex-final modality marker =*hǎʔ* (REAL) or =*hái* (IRR) is regularly changed in tone to =*hǎʔ* (REAL) or =*hài* (IRR) after a high tone syllable.
- Transitive clauses -
 - with first and second subjects (SAP):
 - ✧ The pronominal prefix *mǎ-* is optionally attached to a transitive verb, co-occurring with obligatory consonant voicing and tone alternation on the following syllable.
 - ✧ Only the first singular pronominal clitic *kǎ=* can precede the pronominal prefix *mǎ-*.
 - with third subjects: (non-SAP)
 - ✧ Any pronominal clitic can be attached to a verb complex.

The author is currently interested in another complex system, called “verb stem alternation”, which is commonly found in many Kuki-Chin languages, such as Tiddim Chin (Henderson 1965, Otsuka 2014), Mizo (Chhangte 1993), Hakha Lai (Peterson 1998, Hyman & VanBik 2002), and Daai Chin (So-Hartmann 2009). Verb stem alternation may be synchronically related to transitivity, nominalization (including relativization and subordination), and discourse-pragmatic factors in some Chin languages. VanBik (2009: 10-11) suggested that Asho Chin may also have this kind of verb stem alternation, giving several samples from Houghton (1892), such as *shǎʔ* and *shǎ* ‘look’ (e.g., *shǎʔ=kè* ‘Look!’ and *shǎ=fìè* ‘Look!’ in my data). Although the morphological changes that we have discussed in the present paper may occur independently of the verb stem alternation, further investigation is needed to comprehend how verbs and their modifiers

change their forms and to see how these formal changes are linked to the verb features including stem alternation in other Kuki-Chin languages.

Additional Note

This paper has focused only on main declarative clauses due to limitations of space and did not mention other types of clauses, such as interrogative and imperative clauses. Here let us mention a little about imperative clauses, as similar formal distinction as discussed above can be found between a speech-act participant and a non-speech-act participant.

A verb root addressed to a second person is a strong and imperative order according to Joorman (1906: 28); e.g., *síʔ síʔ* ‘Go, go!’, the most common way to form regular imperatives is to place the modality marker *=fè* after a verb: e.g., *mázá=fè* ‘Help!’, *phóʔ=kè* ‘Read!’, and *phwán=ɲè* ‘Open!’. If the one given a command is a speech-act participant, then the special prefix *ʔǎ-* (not *mǎ-* here) is attached to a verb, or alternatively, tone change occurs as shown in illustrated in (35).

- | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------|
| (35) a. <i>yàʔ=ká</i> | <i>shòʔ=kè</i> | b. <i>cè=fhá</i> | <i>ʔǎ-shòʔ=kè</i> | c. <i>cè=fhá</i> | <i>shóʔ=kè</i> |
| 3SG=OBJ | look=IMP | 1SG=OBJ | 2>1-look=IMP | 1SG=OBJ | look=IMP |
| ‘Look at him!’ | | ‘Look at me!’ | | ‘Look at me!’ | |

Abbreviation

The general principles follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules (Bickel, Comrie and Haspelmath 2015).

1: first person, 2: second person, 3: third person, X>Y: the first X is the agent-like argument and the second Y is the patient-like argument as in The Leipzig Glossing Rule 4E, *: ungrammatical, -: affix boundary, =: clitic boundary, +: compound boundary, A: the agent-like argument associated with prototypical transitive verbs, ALL: allative, AO: agent orienting (Hartmann-So 2009: 292-293), BEN: benefactive (or malfactive) marker, C: consonant, CLF: classifier, COP: copula, DEM: demonstrative, DU: dual, ERG: ergative, IMP: imperative, INS: instrumental case, INTR: intransitive verb, IRR: irrealis, LOC: locative, NEG: negative, NMZ: nominalizer, NSIT: new situation, as described about Burmese *=pì/bì* in Jenny and San San Hnin Tun (2016), OBJ: object, OBL: oblique, P: patient-like argument of canonical transitive verb, PL: plural, PR: proper noun, Q: question marker, REAL: realis, S: single argument associated with canonical intransitive verbs, SFP: sentence final particle, SG: singular, SUBORD: subordinator, T: tone, TOP: topic, TR: transitive verb, TRZ: transitivizer, V: vowel/verb.

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